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ABSTRACT

This program guide encourages discussion on the fundamental values on which the government's economic policies are based. This public talk series program is designed for the discussion of critical social and political issues through a balanced, nonpartisan presentation of a spectrum of views. The core of the program is consideration of four underlying goals: (1) promote economic growth; (2) promote economic justice; (3) improve the quality of public lives; and (4) reduce income inequality. The program packet contains the following sections: (1) introductory letter; (2) notes to organizers; (3) a framework for discussion; (4) the options in brief; (5) perspectives on the options; (6) suggestions for leading this discussion; (7) suggested discussion questions; (8) leading a study circle; (9) suggestions for participants; (10) a follow-up form and (11) Public Talk Series Programs and other resources available from the Study Circles Resource Center. (NLA)

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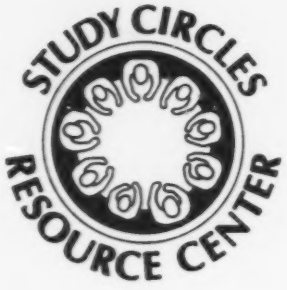

Public Talk Series

AMERICAN SOCIETY AND ECONOMIC POLICY
What Should Our Goals Be?

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"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."
Margaret Mead

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AMERICAN SOCIETY AND ECONOMIC POLICY
What Should Our Goals Be?

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American Society and Economic Policy: What Should Our Goals Be?
is a Project of
The Study Circles Resource Center of Topsfield Foundation, Inc.

Primary Author: Mark Niedergang

The goal of the Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC) is to advance deliberative democracy and improve the quality of public life in the United States. By promoting small-group, democratic, participatory discussions on social and political issues, SCRC hopes to contribute to a more enlightened and involved citizenry capable of making decisions based on informed judgment.

Please write the Study Circles Resource Center, PO Box 203, Pomfret, CT 06258 or call (203) 928-2616 for more information on study circles and the Study Circles Resource Center.

STUDY CIRCLES RESOURCE CENTER

April, 1991

In a democracy, it is crucial that the public have input into the decisions government makes. Citizens must listen to a variety of viewpoints, consider the consequences of all positions, and make hard choices.

The Study Circles Resource Center's Public Talk Series is based on this belief. The series is designed to assist in the discussion of critical social and political issues; each program of the series offers a balanced, non-partisan presentation of a spectrum of views.

American Society and Economic Policy: What Should Our Goals Be? presents an opportunity to discuss the fundamental values on which our government's economic policies are based. These policies have enormous influence on the economy, shape the character of our society, and affect each of our lives.

There are no easy answers, but together citizens can decide on basic directions. We invite you to meet with your friends, neighbors, peers, and associates in small, informal gatherings to discuss the basic goals of our economic policy. We urge you then to communicate your thoughts on this issue to your elected leaders.

The public is responsible for establishing purposes and setting direction for our country. This responsibility cannot be delegated.

Paul J. Aicher

Paul J. Aicher
Chairman

AMERICAN SOCIETY AND ECONOMIC POLICY
What Should Our Goals Be?

Notes to Organizers

This packet of material will assist you in setting up a discussion program on an important and timely subject – the goals of our government's economic policies.

The core of the program is consideration of four different underlying goals for America's economic policy:

Option 1 – Promote Economic Growth
Option 2 – Promote Economic Justice
Option 3 – Improve the Quality of Our Public Lives
Option 4 – Reduce Income Inequality.

These options are not mutually exclusive, but rather serve to focus attention on participants' beliefs about essential characteristics of a healthy society. They are offered as the basis for a highly participatory discussion in which a leader assists participants in wrestling with this difficult issue. By making a strong case for each option, the material reflects a broad range of viewpoints; it is non-partisan, fair, and balanced.

You can use this packet for a single discussion of approximately two hours or for a more thorough "study circle" that meets twice. This material can easily support three or four hours of discussion, and having more than two hours will be especially helpful if the participants are unfamiliar with the discussion process and/or each other. Although it may be harder to organize and to recruit people for two sessions. the extra time is likely to make the experience even more satisfying and enjoyable.

As the organizer, you will need to recruit between 5 and 20 participants, decide on a time and place for the meeting, select a leader, photocopy the material (participants will need copies of items marked with an asterisk in the table of contents), and mail the material to the participants. If you feel that there is not enough time to mail information to participants prior to meeting, the material can be handed out during the meeting.

The most important task of the organizer is choosing the discussion leader. This person need not be an expert on the subject, but some familiarity with the topic is desirable. The leader should be able to encourage participants to freely express their thoughts while maintaining some focus to the session as a whole. A commitment to balance and impartiality is essential. Included for the leader's use are "Suggestions for Leading *American Society and Economic Policy*" and "Suggested Discussion Questions" with specific suggestions for keeping the discussion lively and focused. The leader should also read carefully the general suggestions in "Leading a Study Circle."

You are welcome to photocopy this entire package and share it with others who might be interested in the program. Our only request is that you complete and return the questionnaire on the back cover of this packet to let us know what happened in your discussion. Your feedback is very important to us!

One final note. Study circles are traditionally multiple-session programs in which participants choose the direction of their discussions and have the opportunity to develop familiarity with one another. Based on its experience with this program, we hope that your discussion group will decide to continue to meet and discuss issues facing our society. Please call or write the Study Circles Resource Center for more information on study circles and the Public Talk Series.

AMERICAN SOCIETY AND ECONOMIC POLICY
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A Framework for Discussion

In recent years, Americans have become more concerned about the long-term strength of our economy and the health of our society. Tough economic competition from other countries, bank failures, a recession, and other troublesome developments have caused Americans to worry about the very foundations of our economy.

There is also a sense that our society does not work as well as it once did. Violence, crime, and drugs seem out of control; poverty and homelessness are spreading; pollution threatens our health; and dissatisfaction with public education is widespread. We once had a sense of progress in dealing with problems such as these. Now some people say that America is in irreversible moral and economic decline.

The economy and our society are inextricably linked. The direction of our economic policy determines the nature of our society and reflects our social values. How our government deals with economic growth, jobs, poverty, homelessness, pollution, and tax policy has an enormous influence on our lives. We need to think about the underlying goals behind the choices that our elected officials make.

The four options presented in *American Society and Economic Policy: What Should Our Goals Be?* provide a starting point for thinking aloud with others about the basic guidelines for our nation's economic policy. They are:

Option 1 – Promote Economic Growth
Option 2 – Promote Economic Justice
Option 3 – Improve the Quality of Our Public Lives
Option 4 – Reduce Income Inequality.

These four options are offered not as concrete policies, but as guiding philosophies. There is some overlap between them. Each option has considerable appeal and significant weaknesses. The options are provided to focus the group's attention on different directions which our society might take. Your role is to think about which approach will best guide our policymakers at the state and national level and to share your views.

A central question in comparing these options is the appropriate role of government in our economy and society. How activist should government be? Options 2 and 3 call for extensive government involvement to achieve far-reaching social and economic goals. Options 1 and 4 call for far less government action, but they are less ambitious about trying to improve peoples' lives.

Before coming to any conclusions about the options, you should listen to what others have to say. You may want to "try on" each of the options as the discussion proceeds. Think about your own concerns and goals, and listen to the views of others. How realistic and practical do you think each options is? After you have heard arguments for and against all the choices, perhaps you will decide which option, or combination of options, you prefer – or you might come up with an entirely new option.

Although only economists understand the technical side of economics, the social goals of our economic policy can be understood by any citizen with an interest in public affairs. Intelligent discussion of this issue does not require expertise on your part.

By discussing our economic policy and the broad goals that will guide our leaders, you will contribute to an ongoing public debate about the character of our society. If you feel strongly that we should follow a specific course, we urge you to let your elected officials know.

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The Options in Brief

Option 1 – Promote Economic Growth

The primary goal of our economic policy should be to continue to assure economic growth. This can be achieved through a steady increase in the gross national product (GNP) and improvements in the international competitiveness of American companies. If our GNP is rising, we can assure a rising standard of living and greater opportunities for most citizens, including the poor: "A rising tide lifts all ships." There are varying opinions as to government's role in promoting economic growth, but the overarching goals are the same – a rising GNP and a strong private sector, which is the engine of economic growth.

Option 2 – Promote Economic Justice

The primary goal of our economic policy should be to promote social and economic justice in our society. Government should focus on helping the needy and providing opportunity in the form of education, training, and counseling to those who grow up in poverty. This is also the most effective way to reduce crime and violence. Only after we provide the necessities of life to all should we make economic growth the top priority.

Option 3 – Improve the Quality of Our Public Lives

The primary goal of our economic policy should be to improve the general quality of our public lives. Government should improve the services that are essential in all of our lives. Everyone wants a healthy environment, a good education for their children, safe streets, and good transportation. These are the basic ingredients of a decent society. Our economic policy should focus on providing them.

Option 4 – Reduce Income Inequality

The primary goal of our economic policy should be to reverse the growing economic inequality in America. Shifting the tax burden to the wealthier would lessen the burden on middle- and lower-income Americans and reduce social conflict. If America is to maintain a strong middle class and a sense of fairness and opportunity, government must reduce income inequality.

AMERICAN SOCIETY AND ECONOMIC POLICY
What Should Our Goals Be?

Perspectives on the Options

Option 1 – Promote Economic Growth

The primary goal of our economic policy should be to continue to assure economic growth. This can be achieved through a steady increase in the gross national product (or GNP, which measures the total output of goods and services in the economy) and improvements in the international competitiveness of American companies. Economic growth has made America the world's greatest power and largest economy.

If our GNP is rising, we can assure a rising standard of living and greater opportunities for most citizens, including the poor: "A rising tide lifts all ships." The best way to help people is to offer them jobs, and economic growth creates jobs. A growing economy brings hope for the future and makes people more willing to help the disadvantaged.

There are varying opinions as to what government policies can best promote economic growth. Virtually everyone agrees that government needs to be involved in some parts of the economy, such as building roads and bridges and providing military defense. But some people want the government to be more actively involved in guiding the economy and helping business, as in Japan and most of Western Europe. Others believe that government should stay out of the economy as much as possible and allow the free enterprise system to work without interference. However, the overarching goal is the same – a rising GNP and a strong private sector, which is the engine of economic growth.

Occasionally, a downturn in the business cycle or unexpected events result in poor economic conditions and recession. Our understanding of how to manage the economy for growth is still imperfect. But these setbacks should not distract us from what should be our foremost economic policy goal – steady economic growth and a rising GNP.

Pro:

- By emphasizing growth, government provides incentives to entrepreneurs and businesses to take risks, to start new businesses (which create jobs), and to create new products.
- The world economy is becoming increasingly competitive. If our government does not create positive conditions and incentives for business and economic growth in America, we will not be able to compete. Our standard of living will decline and we will lose jobs.
- Growth has always been the primary focus of our economic policy, and it has made ours the most powerful economy in the world. By keeping taxes and regulations as low as possible, we can make our economy stronger.
- A growing economy creates a less contentious political environment, one in which people are more willing to support government programs which help the poor.
- Our national security – our military power – is directly dependent upon a growing economy that is on the cutting edge of technology. If our economy stops growing and we cease to be one of the world leaders in technology, our ability to maintain a strong military and to build the best weapons will decline.

Con:

• Despite a growing economy, America's poor are worse off than they were a decade ago. The number of homeless people has increased dramatically in the past 10 years. The so-called "safety net" has enormous holes in it. For example, only 37% of those who were unemployed in January 1991 were receiving unemployment benefits. A rising tide has *not* lifted all the ships

• A growing economy has not prevented the standard of living of the middle class from stagnating. It's harder than it was 10 years ago for many people to make ends meet. More people are working two jobs, and fewer people can attain a key part of the "American dream" – ownership of their own homes.

• Our focus on economic growth has really benefitted the rich, who have the money and political power to assure that a supposedly "neutral" economic policy favors their class.

• Economic growth and a higher GNP do not necessarily mean our lives are better. For example, the Exxon Valdez Alaskan oil spill, the most environmentally damaging accident in U.S. history, actually increased the GNP since much of the $2 billion cleanup went to pay labor and equipment costs.

• Unregulated economic growth has created pollution, toxic waste dumps, traffic jams, water shortages, too much garbage, and other problems that decrease the quality of life.

Option 2 – Promote Economic Justice

The primary goal of our economic policy should be to promote social and economic justice in our society. Government should help the 32 million Americans (about one-eighth of our total population) who live in poverty. More than one-third of these people (13 million) are children. We must feed the hungry, house the homeless, and provide decent health care, a good education, and job training. All of our citizens should have at least these minimum necessities of life.

Our society will be stronger, healthier, and safer for all if we help the disadvantaged first. Welfare is necessary to provide a safety net for those who cannot take care of themselves. Most important, government should provide *opportunity* in the form of education, training, counseling, and financial support to those who grow up in poverty. This support will help people "pull themselves up by their own bootstraps."

A full-scale attack on poverty is the most effective way to reduce crime and violence and make our streets safe again. Americans pay a high price for the existence of an "underclass" of people who lack hope for a better future. There are higher taxes for law enforcement and prisons, and higher health, auto, and home insurance rates. Many Americans are victims of violent crime; many more are scared to walk around in their own neighborhoods.

We are a rich nation, but we have many desperately poor people. More than 37 million Americans have no health insurance. The U.S. has slipped to twenty-fifth place in the world in its infant mortality rate. There are many inner-city and rural areas that have been in economic recession for decades. The existence of poverty and homelessness in the midst of plenty conflicts with our most basic moral values.

Despite steady economic growth, many Americans remain in poverty. Only after we have provided all our citizens with the basic necessities of life should we make economic growth our top priority.

Pro:

- It is possible to have a healthy, growing economy *and* a decent minimum standard of living for all people: Japan and many European nations do not have anything like the poverty and homelessness that exists in the U.S.
- Government programs can work. Head Start and the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) feeding program are almost universally acknowledged to be successful, cost-effective ways to help the poor.
- Better education and training for the disadvantaged is an investment in our economic future. The labor force needs a higher level of skills to be productive in a modern economy. Many American workers lack the education and skills to perform even entry-level jobs.
- Our national security depends not only upon a strong military, but upon the strength and cohesion of our society. Poverty erodes our moral fiber and undermines our national purpose.
- While only a fundamental spiritual change in American society is likely to end drug abuse, providing greater opportunity and hope – especially for the disadvantaged – would be the most significant step to reducing drug abuse and the crime that results from it.

Con:

- Government has shown itself to be incompetent in helping the poor. Despite good intentions and a few success stories, social programs usually fail and waste taxpayers' money.

• Not only have programs to help the poor failed, some have actually worsened the condition of the very people they were designed to help. Welfare destroys the work ethic, creates dependence on government handouts, and weakens families.

• We don't have the money. Large social programs will require an increase in taxes or in the federal deficit, both of which would hurt the overall economy.

• Politically, this option is a non-starter. The middle class, already strapped, will refuse to pay more taxes to fund increased spending on social programs, and increasing taxes on the rich would not produce enough money to fund this option.

• Most states cannot do more for the poor. Over 30 states have budget deficits this year. All states (except Vermont) must have a balanced budget, so most states will need to *cut* programs and/or raise taxes in 1991.

Option 3 – Improve the Quality of Our Public Lives

The primary goal of our economic policy should be to improve the general quality of our public lives. This is more important than economic growth. In fact, unregulated economic growth may *reduce* our quality of life by creating pollution, traffic jams, overcrowding, water shortages, garbage, acid rain, and other negative side effects.

Government should begin by improving the services that are essential to all of us. Americans need more day care and better schools. Our public schools must provide a quality education so that our citizens can handle jobs that are more and more challenging. We need better and safer transportation. We must rebuild our decaying infrastructure – roads, bridges, water and sewage treatment plants, and other public facilities. Improving education, transportation, and the infrastructure will enhance our quality of life as well as make the U.S. a stronger competitor in the world economy.

A major emphasis of our economic policy must be to reduce pollution and clean up the environment. Environmental damage threatens our health and endangers our future. For national security and economic reasons, and because of acid rain and the "greenhouse effect," we need an energy policy that reduces our use of fossil fuels and our reliance upon imported oil.

One of the most unpleasant aspects of life in America is crime, especially violent crime. All levels of government need to do more to improve the law enforcement, criminal justice, and prison systems. But the improvements that may help are expensive: more police officers, a speedier criminal justice system, and better job training, rehabilitation, and education for inmates.

Everyone wants clean air, a good education for their children, safe streets, and good transportation. These are the basic ingredients of a decent life and a decent society. Our economic policy should focus on providing them.

Pro:

- When people experience less stress and pressure in their lives (for example, when reliable, affordable day care is available), they are happier, more productive workers and can contribute more to society. So, improvements in the quality of life will also help our economy.
- Even in those areas where increasing the quality of life has negative economic effects – for example, tighter pollution controls – it's a worthwhile trade-off. Money isn't everything.
- If we were less concerned about economic growth and money in our society, the pace of life might slow down. Other parts of our lives that are more important and potentially more rewarding – family, community, friendship – might improve.
- Children are the ones who suffer the most from the lack of good education, day care, transportation, and safe streets. Improving the quality of life will make the greatest difference in the lives of millions of American children.

Con:

- The quality of public life is too vague a standard to be the basis for economic policy. It's a nice idea, but in practice it can't offer sufficient guidance to government because it's not specific enough.
- When the economy is growing, it is improving the quality of our lives by providing people with jobs and more money. With more money, people can decide for themselves how to improve their lives.

• If government enacts regulations that raise businesses' costs – for example, pollution controls or energy taxes – those businesses will be less competitive. An increase in government regulations will lower our economic productivity. The result will be that our standard of living will decline and we will lose more jobs as we lose out in international economic competition.

• In America we have a tradition of less government intervention in society than in Europe or Japan. If government's agenda is to enhance the quality of life, it will have to become more involved in society than most Americans want.

Option 4 – Reduce Income Inequality

The primary goal of our economic policy should be to reverse the growing economic inequality in America. Our society is becoming more polarized: just look at the difference between the schools to which the rich and the poor send their children. The growing wealth of the rich has fueled doubts about the fairness of the American economic system and created social tension.

In the 1980s, the rich grew richer and the poor, poorer. The share of income that went to the top one percent of taxpayers climbed by more than a fifth, while after-tax income declined for most families. The middle class shrank and the number of people living in poverty increased.

The primary reason for the growing inequality of wealth is that changes in the tax laws benefitted the rich. The top federal income tax rate was cut from about 70% to 31%. The social security tax, which increased dramatically, hurts the poor and middle class more than the rich because it taxes only earnings (and not investment income) and does not apply to earnings over $51,300. An additional factor is that many high-paying manufacturing jobs were lost to overseas competition and were replaced by lower-paying service jobs.

Our economic policy should focus on reversing the growing gap between the rich and the poor. Taxes on the wealthy should be increased, and the social security tax should be cut. Shifting the tax burden would improve the quality of life for many people, reduce social conflict, and strengthen the family by reducing financial and time pressures. All government benefits should be means-tested so that those who don't need benefits don't get them. If America is to maintain a strong middle class and a sense of fairness and opportunity, government must reduce income inequality.

Pro:

• There is little evidence to suggest that reducing top tax rates had a beneficial effect on the economy. On the contrary, it contributed to enormous federal budget deficits and other distortions in the economy. Savings did not increase, but speculation in real estate and consumption of luxury items such as Porsches, yachts, and vacation homes did.

• Compared to our European and Asian counterparts, our society is economically unequal. No other democratic country takes so much of its tax revenue from people at the lower end of the economic spectrum and so little from the wealthy.

• Comparisons of pay between American workers and chief executive officers (CEOs) show a large and growing gap. In 1979, CEOs made 29 times the income of the average factory worker. By 1985 the multiple was 40, and by 1988 it was 93.

• Unlike Option 2, this option does not advocate increasing social welfare programs with all the associated costs and drawbacks.

Con:

• While extremes of wealth and poverty are undesirable, the cure is worse than the disease. Redistributing wealth through taxation is really modified socialism. Countries such as England and Sweden, which have high tax rates, have weaker economies than ours.

• Raising tax rates will create disincentives to work and will stifle the entrepreneurial spirit that has made our economy great. The 1980s witnessed a reinvigoration of American entrepreneurship because tax cuts created greater incentives for people to invest in risky enterprises.

• An inevitable outcome of redistributing wealth is an expansion of the welfare state and more government intervention in our society. Intense political pressures for government social programs would be created.

• An unequal distribution of wealth is not a great problem. America continues to offer great economic opportunity. Look at the success of immigrants and others who grew up in poverty but have built businesses and made fortunes. It is inevitable that some will succeed and other fail; this is human nature and nothing can change it.

• It is a myth that the poor resent the rich in America. The reason that there are low taxes on the wealthy here is that (1) Americans believe that they can "make it" and become wealthy themselves, and (2) Americans favor less government intervention in society.

Suggestions for Leading AMERICAN SOCIETY AND ECONOMIC POLICY

Every discussion group is unique, primarily because of the participants and the "chemistry" within the group. The following observations are not intended to be definitive, but to offer suggestions from people who have experience leading discussions.

Since the very object of a planned discussion is for participants to learn from each other, the leader must accept the risks as well as the rewards that come when people express sudden insights and emotions. The leader's job, then, is to strike a balance between a structured discussion and spontaneity.

The discussion will be more successful and more fun if participants can share their opinions in a relaxed atmosphere. So enjoy yourself!

Preparation

The "Notes to Organizers" will give you a quick overview of this program and its format. Your most important reading, of course, is the participants' material. Read it carefully several times. You should be familiar enough with the four options that you can describe them clearly. The "Suggested Discussion Questions" can be quite useful in a pinch, so you may want to keep them handy during the discussion. Important general advice is offered in "Leading a Study Circle."

One or Two Sessions?

These suggestions are written for groups that meet once. We encourage you to consider doing a study circle with two sessions. If you decide to hold two separate sessions, you will need to make a few modifications in the general plan laid out here. See the section on the next page, "Using Two Sessions," for instructions.

Starting the Discussion

In beginning, it is important to clearly state the ground rules. Explain that your role as a leader is to help start the discussion, to keep it focused, and to ensure that no one dominates and everyone has an opportunity to speak. Tell the group it is essential that everyone listen well and respect the views of others. Answer any questions they may have about the process. Make sure that participants give their consent to the ground rules.

To kick off the discussion, ask participants to introduce themselves, describe their occupation, and say what motivated them to attend. You might then ask each person to state their greatest concern about our current economic situation. This should help "break the ice."

Explain the Options

After the group is warmed up a bit, you may want to summarize "A Framework for Discussion" or give participants a few minutes to read it. Explain that the options are not detailed policy prescriptions

but broad, guiding philosophies. The purpose of the discussion is to consider which option they prefer as the primary goal for our economic policy.

Next, focus on the four options. Give the group 5-10 minutes to read (or review) "The Options in Brief" and to skim the pros and cons in the full-length descriptions of the options.

You might ask the group to present the options and points in favor of each one. This helps people to understand the choices before staking out positions. You might ask four different people to each explain one of the options. (It doesn't matter whether the presenters agree with the options; in fact, it's better if they don't!) Encourage the participants to consider all the options, especially those that may be unpopular.

Debating the Options

Only after the group is familiar with the options and the reasons why people might support each one should you open things up and allow participants to debate and criticize the options in a free-wheeling discussion. This is where you may need to step in and make sure everyone has a chance to speak. Encourage people to explore the implications of each of the options.

Consensus need not be a goal of the discussion, and in fact may be an unsuitable goal. But it will be constructive to help the group see any important areas of agreement that most participants share.

Closing

After people have expressed their preferences, you might ask if anyone wants to try to come up with their own fifth option, or if anyone can present a combination of several (or of all) of the options that would be a better approach.

You might close the discussion by asking what advice participants would give if they had a few minutes with President Bush or their governor. Invite each person to answer in turn. Urge participants to inform their elected officials about what they think our government's economic goals should be.

Please encourage all participants to fill out and return the "Follow-up Form." Don't forget to thank them for attending and for sharing their views with the group.

Using Two Sessions

You can easily divide this discussion program into two sessions. The first session provides preparation and background for the group and includes: explaining the ground rules, participants' introductions and opening comments, introducing the framework for discussion, and explaining, clarifying, and understanding the options. These four steps can easily take the bulk of a two-hour session, especially if the members of the group are unfamiliar with the discussion process and/or with each other. The second session can then focus on debating and discussing the implications of the options and on closing.

It's a good idea to begin debating the options toward the end of the first session, as this is often the liveliest activity. It will whet participants' appetites for more. The second session will then provide ample time for a full airing of differences and supporting arguments, a look at areas of agreement, and a serious discussion of other options. With two sessions there will also likely be enough closing time for members of the group to describe where they stand, how they got there, and whether the discussion had any impact on their thinking.

AMERICAN SOCIETY AND ECONOMIC POLICY
What Should Our Goals Be?

Suggested Discussion Questions

Questions for starting the discussion

- Please introduce yourself, describe your occupation, and tell us what caused you to come to this discussion today.
- What is your greatest concern about our current economic situation?

Questions for understanding the options

- Ask a person to explain one of the options and some of the points in its favor. Ask others in the group to add on.
- If you have a large group or are using two sessions, you might try breaking the participants into four small groups. Assign each group one of the options. Give them 5-10 minutes to prepare, and then have them present it, explain it, and defend it as convincingly as they possibly can.
- For each option, you might ask, "What are the two or three strongest points that can be made for this approach?"
- The role of government is a central factor in evaluating these options. How would you compare and contrast the government's role in each of the four options?
- What do you personally like about this option?
- To what extent do you think that each of the four options have actually been tried, either in the U.S. or in other countries?

Questions for debating the options

- What are the negative consequences of each of the options?
- What do you think is unrealistic or impractical about this option? Why won't it work?
- Supporters of Option 1 would say that focusing on economic growth is the best way to satisfy the other goals, for if we fail to support Option 1, the economy will fall apart and everything will become worse. What do you think of this argument?
- Supporters of Option 1 say that a growing economy means that everyone will have a bigger piece of the pie. There is less political infighting if everyone's standard of living is rising. So the way to help the poor is to keep the economy growing. What do you think of this position?
- Supporters of Option 2 say that emphasizing social and economic justice might not create economic growth, but it would make America a more harmonious and decent society. So people would be better off even if their standard of living was lower. What do you think?
- Many people would agree with supporters of Option 2 in theory, but say that in practice, it just wouldn't work. If you had to make Option 2 work, how would you go about it?

• Many supporters of Option 3 believe the environmental crisis is so serious that we need to adopt a completely different way of looking at economic policy. Perhaps the bottom line should be, "Will it hurt the environment?" rather than, "Will it produce economic growth?" What do you think?

• One aspect of implementing Option 4 would be to raise taxes on gasoline. This would cost most people money and reduce economic activity. But it would also reduce pollution and energy use and provide revenue for the government. How would you go about evaluating these tradeoffs?

• Option 4 does not include redistribution of wealth through raising estate and inheritance taxes. Would taking this approach, which means going beyond reducing income inequalities, enhance or lessen the appeal of this option?

• To what extent do you think America is a class society? Do you think our society would be better off if it were more like some European countries where income is much more equal, where there aren't many rich people and there aren't many poor people?

Questions for closing

• Is there anyone who strongly favors one of the options and wants to present a final case for it?

• Which option do you prefer and why?

• Do you see any points in common that supporters of all four options might agree upon?

• Is there someone who would like to offer a fifth option, either a new one or one that combines the best elements of the four presented here?

• Can the goals of these four options be balanced in one overarching compromise policy?

• How does your own self-interest come into your choice? Is the option you prefer the best one for you? Is it good for you but bad for the country? Or good for the country but bad for you?

• If you had a few minutes with President Bush or your governor, what advice would you give them?

Leading a Study Circle

The study circle leader is the most important person in determining its success or failure. It is the leader's responsibility to moderate the discussion by asking questions, identifying key points, and managing the group process. While doing all this, the leader must be friendly, understanding, and supportive.

The leader does not need to be an expert. However, thorough familiarity with the reading material and previous reflection about the directions in which the discussion might go will make the leader more effective and more comfortable in this important role.

The most difficult aspects of leading discussion groups include keeping discussion focused, handling aggressive participants, and keeping one's own ego at bay. A background of leading small group discussions or meetings is helpful. The following suggestions and principles of group leadership will be useful even for experienced leaders.

• **"Beginning is half," says an old Chinese proverb.** Set a friendly and relaxed atmosphere from the start. A quick review of the suggestions for participants will help ensure that everyone understands the ground rules for the discussion.

• **Be an active listener.** You will need to truly hear and understand what people say if you are to guide the discussion effectively. Listening carefully will set a good example for participants and will alert you to potential conflicts.

• **Stay neutral and be cautious about expressing your own values.** As the leader, you have considerable power with the group. That power should be used only for the purpose of furthering the discussion and not for establishing the correctness of a particular viewpoint.

• **Utilize open-ended questions.** Questions such as, "What other possibilities have we not yet considered?" will encourage discussion rather than elicit short, specific answers and are especially helpful for drawing out quiet members of the group.

• **Draw out quiet participants.** Do not allow anyone to sit quietly or to be forgotten by the group. Create an opportunity for each participant to contribute. The more you know about each person in the group, the easier this will be.

• **Don't be afraid of pauses and silences.** People need time to think and reflect. Sometimes silence will help someone build up the courage to make a valuable point. Leaders who tend to be impatient may find it helpful to count silently to 10 after asking a question.

• **Do not allow the group to make you the expert or "answer person."** You should not play the role of final arbiter. Let the participants decide what they believe. Allow group members to correct each other when a mistake is made.

• **Don't always be the one to respond to comments and questions.** Encourage interaction among the group. Participants should be conversing with each other, not just with the leader. Questions or comments that are directed at the leader can often be deflected to another member of the group.

• **Don't allow the group to get hung up on unprovable "facts" or assertions.** Disagreements about basic facts are common for con

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troversial issues. If there is debate over a fact or figure, ask the group if that fact is relevant to the discussion. In some cases, it is best to leave the disagreement unresolved and move on.

• **Do not allow the aggressive, talkative person or faction to dominate.** Doing so is a sure recipe for failure. One of the most difficult aspects of leading a discussion is restraining domineering participants. Don't let people call out and gain control of the floor. If you allow this to happen the aggressive will dominate, you may lose control, and the more polite people will become angry and frustrated.

• **Use conflict productively and don't allow participants to personalize their disagreements.** Do not avoid conflict, but try to keep discussion focused on the point at hand. Since everyone's opinion is important in a study circle, participants should feel safe saying what they really think – even if it's unpopular.

• **Synthesize or summarize the discussion occasionally.** It is helpful to consolidate related ideas to provide a solid base for the discussion to build upon.

• **Ask hard questions.** Don't allow the discussion to simply confirm old assumptions. Avoid following any "line," and encourage participants to re-examine their assumptions. Call attention to points of view that have not been mentioned or seriously considered, whether you agree with them or not.

• **Don't worry about attaining consensus.** It's good for the study circle to have a sense of where participants stand, but it's not necessary to achieve consensus. In some cases a group will be split; there's no need to hammer out agreement.

• **Close the session with a brief question that each participant may respond to in turn.** This will help them review their progress in the meeting and give a sense of closure.

Suggestions for Participants

The goal of a study circle is not to learn a lot of facts, or to attain group consensus, but rather to deepen each person's understanding of the issue. This can occur in a focused discussion when people exchange views freely and consider a variety of viewpoints. The process – democratic discussion among equals – is as important as the content.

The following points are intended to help you make the most of your study circle experience and to suggest ways in which you can help the group.

• **Listen carefully to others.** Make sure you are giving everyone the chance to speak.

• **Maintain an open mind.** You don't score points by rigidly sticking to your early statements. Feel free to explore ideas that you have rejected or failed to consider in the past.

• **Strive to understand the position of those who disagree with you.** Your own knowledge is not complete until you understand other participants' points of view and why they feel the way they do. It is important to respect people who disagree with you; they have reasons for their beliefs. You should be able to make a good case for positions you disagree with. This level of comprehension and empathy will make you a much better advocate for whatever position you come to.

• **Help keep the discussion on track.** Make sure your remarks are relevant; if necessary, explain how your points are related to the discussion. Try to make your points while they are pertinent.

• **Speak your mind freely, but don't monopolize the discussion.** If you tend to talk a lot in groups, leave room for quieter people. Be aware that some people may want to speak but are intimidated by more assertive people.

• **Address your remarks to the group rather than the leader.** Feel free to address your remarks to a particular participant, especially one who has not been heard from or who you think may have special insight. Don't hesitate to question other participants to learn more about their ideas.

• **Communicate your needs to the leader.** The leader is responsible for guiding the discussion, summarizing key ideas, and soliciting clarification of unclear points, but he/she may need advice on when this is necessary. Chances are you are not alone when you don't understand what someone has said.

• **Value your own experience and opinions.** Everyone in the group, including you, has unique knowledge and experience; this variety makes the discussion an interesting learning experience for all. Don't feel pressured to speak, but realize that failing to speak means robbing the group of your wisdom.

• **Engage in friendly disagreement.** Differences can invigorate the group, especially when it is relatively homogeneous on the surface. Don't hesitate to challenge ideas you disagree with. Don't be afraid to play devil's advocate, but don't go overboard. If the discussion becomes heated, ask yourself and others whether reason or emotion is running the show.

• **Remember that humor and a pleasant manner can go far in helping you make your points.** A belligerent attitude may prevent acceptance of your assertions. Be aware of how your body language can close you off from the group.

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Follow-up Form

Please take a few minutes to complete and return this follow-up form. Your answers will help us improve the Public Talk Series material and make it a more valuable resource.

1) Did you use *American Society and Economic Policy: What Should Our Goals Be*? ___ yes ___ no
If so, how? (check all that apply)
___ in a discussion group ___ for reference or research material ___ for lecture or classroom use

2) What did you think of the program?

	very good				poor
content	1	2	3	4	5
format	1	2	3	4	5
balance, fairness	1	2	3	4	5
suggestions for leaders	1	2	3	4	5
suggestions for participants	1	2	3	4	5
supplemental readings	1	2	3	4	5

3) Please answer the following if you held or were part of a discussion group.

Your role was ____ the organizer ____ the discussion leader ____ a participant

Who was the sponsoring organization (if any)? _____

How many attended? _____

Where was the program held? city _____ state _____

How many times did your group meet to discuss this topic? ___

Participants in this discussion group (check all that apply)
____ came together just for this discussion
____ hold discussions regularly
____ meet regularly, but not usually for issue-oriented discussion

Would you use study circles again? ____ yes ____ no

4) What future topics would you like to see in SCRC's Public Talk Series?

5) Other comments?

Name _____

Organization _____

Address _____

_____

_____

Phone _____

Please return to the Study Circles Resource Center, PO Box 203, Pomfret, CT 06258
or FAX to (203) 928-3713.
See reverse side for information on other Public Talk Series programs.

Public Talk Series Programs and Other Resources Available from the Study Circles Resource Center

Publications of the Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC) include the Public Talk Series (PTS); training material for study circle organizers, leaders, and writers; a quarterly newsletter; a clearinghouse list of study circle material developed by a variety of organizations; and a bibliography on study circles and small-group learning. Prices for PTS programs are noted below. (You are welcome to order a single copy of PTS programs and then photocopy as many as necessary for your group.) All other publications are free of charge.

Public Talk Series (PTS) programs

___ Special 1992 **Election Year Discussion Set** **$5.00** for the set:
- *The Health Care Crisis in America*
- *Welfare Reform: What Should We Do for Our Nation's Poor?*
- *Revitalizing America's Economy for the 21st Century*
- *The Role of the United States in a Changing World*

Domestic Policy discussion programs - $2.00 each
___ 203 - *Revitalizing America's Economy for the 21st Century*
___ 401 - *The Health Care Crisis in America*
___ 501 - *Homelessness in America: What Should We Do?*
___ 302 - *The Right to Die*
___ 301 - *The Death Penalty*
___ 304 - *Welfare Reform: What Should We Do for Our Nation's Poor?*
___ 202 - *American Society and Economic Policy: What Should Our Goals Be?*

Foreign Policy discussion programs - $2.00 each
___ 303 - *Are There Reasonable Grounds for War?*
___ 106 - *International Environmental Issues: U.S. Policy Choices* *
___ 105 - *Facing a Disintegrated Soviet Union* *
___ 107 - *The Arab-Israeli Conflict: Looking for a Lasting Peace* *
___ 102 - *America's Role in the Middle East* *
___ 104 - *The Role of the United States in a Changing World* *

* based on material developed by the Choices for the 21st Century Education Project of the Center for Foreign Policy Development at Brown University

Other resources from the Study Circles Resource Center

Pamphlets
___ "An Introduction to Study Circles" (20 pages)
___ "Guidelines for Organizing and Leading a Study Circle" (32 pages)
___ "Guidelines for Developing Study Circle Course Material" (32 pages)

Resource Briefs (single pages)
___ "What Is a Study Circle?"
___ "Leading a Study Circle"
___ "Organizing a Study Circle"
___ "The Role of the Participant"
___ "Developing Study Circle Course Material"
___ "What Is the Study Circles Resource Center?"
___ "The Study Circles Resource Center Clearinghouse"

Connections (single-page descriptions of programs)
___ Adult Religious Education
___ Youth Programs
___ Study Circle Researchers
___ Unions

Focus on Study Circles (free quarterly newsletter)
___ Sample copy
___ Subscription

Other Resources
___ Clearinghouse list of study circle material
___ Annotated bibliography on study circles, small-group learning, and participatory democracy

Please send in your order, with payment if you order PTS programs, with your follow-up form on reverse.

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